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Where Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Meets Fieldwork: Engaging Luganda Learners Through Socio-Cultural Expressions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study examined whether simple fieldwork data-collection tools could improve Senior Six students' engagement when learning socio-cultural expressions in Luganda.

Methodology: A five-week pilot cluster experiment was conducted in three rural Ugandan advanced-level schools. Six intact Luganda classes were assigned by stream to a fieldwork-tool condition or a comparison condition. Data came from an engagement scale, classroom observations, project scores, journals, teacher logs, and student interviews.

Main Findings: Students who used interview guides, proverb logs, observation forms, reflective journals, and presentation planners showed stronger engagement than students taught mainly through teacher explanation, board notes, and textbook discussion. The largest gains were seen in participation, task completion, project talk, and the ability to connect classroom texts with community meanings.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The study shows how low-cost, relationship-centred fieldwork routines can turn Luganda socio-cultural content from memorised knowledge into inquiry. It contributes a practical model for using community knowledge ethically in local-language classrooms without relying on expensive technology.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Uganda's 2025 Local Languages Framework expects Senior Six learners to document oral literature, cultural practices, and socio-cultural expressions, not simply memorise them for examinations [1]. The gap addressed in this study is therefore practical and immediate: many Luganda lessons still treat living cultural knowledge as fixed notes on the board, while the curriculum now expects learners to investigate how such knowledge is used in homes and communities. This gap matters because Luganda carries clan memory, oral artistry, moral reasoning, naming traditions, kinship terms, and everyday forms of respect. When learners only copy definitions, they may pass a test but miss the social life of the language.

This article reports a pilot experiment titled Fieldwork in Documenting Indigenous Knowledge. It asked a modest question: can simple data-collection tools increase student engagement when teaching socio-cultural expressions in Luganda? The question emerged from rural advanced-level classes where students often described socio-cultural topics as easy but dry. Teachers had cultural material, but they lacked a manageable routine for moving between classroom texts and community knowledge.

The intervention was deliberately low-cost. Instead of digital platforms or expensive field visits, the treatment classes used a one-page interview guide, a proverb-and-saying log, an observation form, a reflective journal, and a presentation planner. These tools helped students document knowledge from family and community members. The comparison classes studied the same themes, with the same teachers and time allocation, through teacher explanation, board notes, textbook discussion, and an end-of-unit essay.

The study is important for two reasons. First, it tests a practical way of making the competence-based local-language curriculum teachable in schools with limited resources. Second, it treats learners' communities as knowledge partners, while also asking what can go wrong when fieldwork becomes too heavy, too formal, or ethically unclear. The aim is not to romanticise culture. It is to show how Luganda classrooms can use small fieldwork routines to make cultural learning more active, careful, and socially meaningful.

Culturally responsive pedagogy begins from a simple premise: learners do not arrive in school empty. They arrive with language, memory, humour, relationships, values, and ways of making sense of the world. Teaching becomes more meaningful when it works with those resources rather than around them [2], [3]. Recent work also argues that culturally responsive education and student engagement should be studied together because belonging, voice, relevance, and participation are closely linked [4].

This claim is especially important in African settings where schooling still carries colonial residues. Recent studies show that culturally responsive pedagogy in Africa must go beyond adding local examples to lessons. It must ask whose knowledge counts and how school learning can reconnect with community life without treating culture as decoration [5], [6]. Similar studies in Yoruba orature, South African science education, Nigerian biology and ICT education, and Indigenous education more broadly show that learners participate more deeply when cultural knowledge is handled as serious knowledge rather than background colour [7]-[10], [15]-[22].

For Luganda teaching, the issue is urgent because the subject is not only a language course. It is a route into social memory, ritual speech, oral literature, kinship logic, and the moral vocabulary of ordinary life. NCDC's framework places documentation and project work within the Senior Six local-language curriculum [1]. Yet a curriculum statement does not automatically create engagement. Teachers still need routines that help learners ask questions, verify wording, compare meanings, and present findings clearly.

Project-based and inquiry-based learning are useful here because students usually invest more effort when a task has a real question, a real audience, and a purpose beyond copying notes [11], [12]. Recent work on Luganda teaching also shows that competence-based reforms require stronger teacher support if learner-centred methods are to become more than slogans [13], [14]. Fieldwork can help, but only if it is light, ethical, and relational. A form or checklist should help students listen better; it should not turn elders into data suppliers or make weaker writers anxious.

This study therefore treats socio-cultural expressions as living acts of interpretation. A proverb becomes meaningful when a learner can say who uses it, in what moment, with what tone, and with what disagreements around meaning. A cultural practice becomes educative when learners can compare what is written in texts with what elders remember and what families now do. This view also draws on the older Luganda teaching resources used in the participating schools, especially Nsimbi's work on Luganda language and Ssekamwa's collection of proverbs and sayings [24]-[27].

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

The study used a pilot, cluster-assigned experimental design with a qualitative strand embedded throughout implementation. The quantitative aim was to compare changes in engagement between classes that used fieldwork data-collection tools and classes that received conventional teacher-led instruction. The qualitative aim was to understand why engagement shifted, how students used the tools, and where the approach became difficult.

2.2. Participants and Setting

Three rural advanced-level schools in central Uganda participated. Each school had two parallel Senior Six Luganda streams taught by the same teacher. Within each school, one stream was assigned to the fieldwork-tool condition and the other to the comparison condition. This reduced teacher effects because each teacher taught both versions of the unit.

A total of 146 students were enrolled across the six classes at baseline. Eight students were absent during the posttest week or did not complete the engagement instrument, leaving 138 complete cases for outcome analysis: 69 in the fieldwork-tool group and 69 in the comparison group. Students were aged 17 to 20 years, with a mean age of 18.2 years. Seventy-one were female and sixty-seven were male.

2.3. Source Texts and Learning Materials

The unit focused on Senior Six Topic 4, Socio-Cultural Expressions, under the 2025 Local Languages Framework [1]. Teachers in both conditions used selected proverbs and idioms from Ssekamwa's Ebisoko n'engero, language and terminology work from Nsimbi's Olulimi Oluganda, teacher-made notes based on school-held copies of Amagezi g'Abaganda, and duplicated materials labelled Olulimi Oluganda n'Ennono Zaalwo [24]-[27].

The fieldwork toolkit contained five paper-based instruments: a one-page interview guide with open-ended Luganda prompts; a proverb-and-saying log with columns for exact wording, speaker, context, explanation, and disputed meaning; an observation form for rituals, objects, performances, or settings; a short reflective journal; and a presentation planner.

2.4. Intervention Condition

The fieldwork-tool condition ran for five weeks, with two 80-minute Luganda lessons each week. In week one, teachers introduced respectful documentation: ask permission, avoid ridicule, do not record people secretly, and report with respect. Students practised asking questions, writing exact wording, checking unclear meanings, and deciding when not to press an elder for information.

In weeks two and three, learners worked in pairs or triads to document at least one proverb or saying, one socio-cultural practice, and one vocabulary cluster or phrase set connected to the practice. Topics included courtship, child upbringing, funeral rites, inheritance, clan identity, naming, food taboos, work, respect language, and everyday conflict resolution. In weeks four and five, learners compared findings in class and prepared short presentations and expository project reports.

2.5. Comparison Condition

The comparison classes studied the same socio-cultural themes with the same teachers, time allocation, and core texts. They discussed proverbs and practices, copied notes from the chalkboard, listened to teacher explanations, answered oral questions, and wrote an end-of-unit essay. They did not receive the fieldwork toolkit and were not required to collect information from home or community informants. This was a defensible comparison because it represented normal instruction in the schools, not an artificially weak control condition.

2.6. Measures

Student engagement was the primary outcome. It was measured with a 16-item Luganda engagement scale administered at baseline and posttest. The scale covered behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement, four dimensions widely used in engagement research [28], [29]. Responses used a five-point scale from 1 (not true of me) to 5 (very true of me). Internal consistency was good in this sample, with Cronbach's alpha of .88 for the full scale.

Three secondary indicators were also used. Trained observers completed a brief lesson engagement checklist during two lessons per class in weeks two and five. Teachers recorded assignment and journal completion. Oral presentations and short project reports were scored on a 20-point rubric covering content relevance, clarity of expression, use of evidence, and responsiveness to questions. Qualitative data came from reflective journals, teacher logs, researcher field notes, observed classroom talk, and 18 short post-intervention interviews with students from both conditions.

2.7. Procedure, Fidelity, and Data Analysis

The study was implemented during the second term, when the socio-cultural expressions unit was due in all three schools. Before the unit began, teachers met with the research team for a one-day planning session to review the lesson sequence, refine the tools, and agree on minimum shared content across both conditions. Fidelity was tracked through teacher logs and observation checklists. Teachers delivered 91% of the planned fieldwork-tool components and 94% of the planned comparison components.

Quantitative analysis focused on posttest differences while accounting for baseline engagement and the use of intact classes. Because this was a pilot with only six class clusters, the analysis did not rely on strong claims from complex modelling. It reported group means, standard deviations, mean differences, 95% confidence intervals where appropriate, and Hedges' g to give a small-sample estimate of effect size [30]. Classroom observation, completion, and project-score indicators were analysed descriptively to check whether the self-report pattern was visible in actual classroom behaviour.

Qualitative analysis was used to explain the numbers rather than decorate them. Student journals, interview notes, teacher logs, and field notes were coded inductively in Luganda first, then grouped into themes on relevance, participation, ownership, difficulty, and ethics. Themes were translated into English after coding so

that the analysis did not lose the local meaning of students' words. This approach followed the logic of thematic analysis while keeping the language of the classroom close to the interpretation [31].

2.8. Ethics

The study received school-level approval and local ethics clearance through the participating institution. Parents or guardians provided consent, and students gave assent. Community informants were told that participation was voluntary and that names would not be used in the report. Teachers also discussed the difference between respectful documentation and gossip, exposure, or ridicule.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Quantitative Engagement Outcomes

At baseline, the two groups were almost the same on overall engagement. By posttest, the fieldwork-tool classes had moved further ahead. The difference appeared not only in self-report scores but also in observed participation, journal completion, and project performance.

Table 1. Summary of Engagement Outcomes By Group

Indicator	Fieldwork-tool group	Comparison group	Difference or interpretation
Overall engagement at baseline (1-5)	M = 3.13, SD = 0.46	M = 3.11, SD = 0.49	Groups were closely comparable before the unit
Overall engagement at posttest (1-5)	M = 4.04, SD = 0.41	M = 3.52, SD = 0.47	Mean difference = 0.51; Hedges g = 0.72
Observed on-task behaviour	86%	71%	15 percentage-point advantage for fieldwork-tool lessons
Voluntary contributions per lesson	14.7	8.9	More student-initiated classroom talk in the fieldwork-tool classes
Journal completion	92%	76%	Fieldwork tools supported steady task completion
Presentation/project score (20 points)	15.8	12.9	Fieldwork-tool classes produced more grounded project work

The findings in Table 1 indicate that both groups started from a relatively similar level of engagement, with the fieldwork-tool group recording a mean score of 3.13 and the comparison group 3.11 at baseline, showing that the two classes were initially comparable before the instructional intervention. However, after the learning unit, the fieldwork-tool group demonstrated a notable improvement, reaching a posttest mean of 4.04 compared to 3.52 in the comparison group. The mean difference of 0.51 and Hedges' g of 0.72 suggest a moderate to strong practical effect of the fieldwork-tool approach on student engagement. This improvement was also reflected in classroom behavior, where observed on-task behavior was higher in the fieldwork-tool group (86%) than in the comparison group (71%), indicating greater student focus and participation during lessons. In addition, students in the fieldwork-tool classes made more voluntary contributions per lesson (14.7 compared to 8.9), suggesting that the use of field-based learning activities encouraged more active classroom interaction and student-initiated discussion. Task completion was also stronger, as shown by journal completion rates of 92% versus 76%, indicating that the structured use of fieldwork tools supported consistency in student responsibility. Furthermore, presentation and project scores were higher in the fieldwork-tool group (15.8 out of 20) than in the comparison group (12.9), showing that students were able to produce more contextualized and evidence-based work. Overall, these results demonstrate that integrating fieldwork tools into instruction contributed positively to student engagement, participation, responsibility, and learning outcomes.

3.2. Why The Tools Increased Engagement

The qualitative data showed that the tools increased engagement mainly because they gave learners a reason to talk to real people. In ordinary lessons, some learners treated socio-cultural expressions as syllabus material. With the toolkit, the task became more purposeful. One student wrote, 'Enkola eno eri nga etwala essomero eka' - 'This method appears to take the school to a home.' Another student said the work was not just asking random questions; there was something worth gatherin.

The tools also slowed students down in useful ways. The proverb log asked for exact wording, speaker, context, explanation, and disputed meaning. This helped learners notice that a proverb may have similar but not identical forms across homes. For example, one group first glossed Akatono kazza omukwano as 'a small gift restores love.' After speaking with elders, they widened the meaning to include small acts after conflict, greetings, visiting the sick, and modest apology. The learning moved from translation to social use.

A third reason was ownership through comparison. When groups returned with slightly different findings, class discussion shifted from waiting for the teacher's answer to comparing households, villages, age groups, and religious backgrounds. This was also a matter of dignity. A student explained, 'Mu masomo amalala tugenda okunoonya ku bintu bya balala. Wano twanoonyezza ku bintu byaffe' - 'In other subjects we go to research other people's things. Here we researched our own things.'

3.3. Qualitative Examples From Fieldwork

The notebooks showed stronger interpretation than the short literal definitions seen in earlier class notes. One group documented a grandmother's explanation of Enjala esaza amagezi. Their first interpretation was that hunger makes people think hard. After the interview, they added that the proverb can also warn that desperation may change moral judgement. Another group studying okwabya olumbe described the last funeral rites not only as mourning but also as a time for settling responsibilities, recognising successors, repairing strained relations, and keeping the clan socially visible.

Proverb work also made old sayings feel current. A teacher log described a learner who returned surprised that an elder rejected the school definition of "Ebigambo byangu; omukwano muzibu" as 'people lie.' The elder argued that the saying warns that speech is cheap unless supported by action. The class then discussed friendship, social media promises, and performative kindness. The proverb became part of present life rather than an antique line from a notebook.

3.4. Where The Toolkit Became Heavy

The most important caution is that the tools did not help simply because they existed. The first interview guide was too long. Some students read questions one by one without adapting them to the conversation, and weaker writers became anxious when trying to record everything. Teachers shortened the guide and advised students to capture key phrases first, then expand notes immediately after the conversation. The quality of logs improved after this change.

Ethics also mattered. Some students wanted to record elders on phones to avoid misquoting them, but not every informant was comfortable with that. One student later wrote that the activity taught them okuwulira okusooka okusinga okukwata obukakafu - to listen first before chasing proof. Documentation needs accuracy, but culturally grounded fieldwork also depends on trust.

Access to knowledgeable adults was uneven. Some learners lived in hostels, some had guardians with little time, and some came from homes where certain practices were no longer discussed. Teachers and peers had to widen the circle of possible informants. This is important because home-based cultural tasks can unintentionally favour learners with easier access to recognised cultural capital.

3.5. Comparison-Class Experience

The comparison classes were not inactive. Many students respected the subject and appreciated direct explanation, especially for unfamiliar ceremonial vocabulary. However, engagement was more dependent on the teacher's energy. One student said, 'Twafunye eby'okuwandiika naye tewali muntu gwe twabuuzizzaako' - 'We got things to write, but there was no person we asked about them.' Another asked, 'Bino tubisoma mu bitabo, naye biri ludda wa mu bulamu obwa bulijjo?' - 'We learn these things in books, but where do we find them in daily life?' The comparison classes had content, but they had less of an inquiry bridge between text and life.

3.6. Discussion and Contribution

The main meaning of the findings is that engagement grew when Luganda was treated as a language for inquiry, not only a subject for recall. The toolkit gave learners a path between school and community, text and talk, inherited meaning and present use. This is the contribution of the study: it offers a small, low-cost, and ethically aware routine for making the local-language curriculum more active in ordinary rural classrooms.

The findings also challenge a shallow reading of culturally responsive pedagogy. It is not enough to mention culture in a lesson or add a proverb at the beginning of a topic. Learners became more engaged because they had to ask, listen, compare, and return to class with accountable knowledge. That process changed classroom authority. The teacher remained important, but elders, parents, peers, and students' own questions also became part of the learning system.

At the same time, the study warns against romanticising fieldwork. More paperwork is not the same as better learning. When the guide was too long, it weakened conversation. When recording was not negotiated carefully, it threatened trust. When access to knowledge holders was uneven, equity became an issue. A culturally responsive toolkit must therefore be light enough to use, respectful enough to protect relationships, and flexible enough for learners with different home situations.

The first implication is practical. Luganda teachers do not need expensive technology to make socio-cultural expressions more engaging. A short interview guide, one proverb log, one observation form, and a brief journal can be enough if they are introduced carefully and used for reflection rather than paperwork.

The second implication concerns teacher preparation. Teachers need support not only to explain proverbs and cultural practices, but also to teach learners how to document, verify, compare, and present community knowledge. The third implication concerns assessment. Project rubrics should reward thoughtful interpretation and respectful documentation, not the volume of notes collected. The fourth implication is reciprocity. Schools should consider returning findings to communities through noticeboards, oral presentations, short booklets, or community discussion days.

This was a pilot study in three schools, over one short unit, with six intact classes. The number of clusters was small for broad causal claims. The engagement scale was reliable but still depended partly on self-report. Some classroom source materials were school-held and not bibliographically stable in public catalogues, which reflects the reality of local-language teaching resources but also limits traceability. The study focused on engagement more than long-term retention, examination performance, or sustained writing quality. Future research should test the approach with more schools and follow learners for longer.

4. CONCLUSION

This pilot study found that simple fieldwork data-collection tools increased student engagement in rural Senior Six Luganda classes more than textbook discussion and teacher explanation alone. The tools worked because they connected classroom learning with community knowledge and gave students a clear reason to ask, listen, record, compare, and present. The stronger lesson is that engagement depends on how tools are used. Light, respectful, and relationship-centred routines made Luganda feel intellectually alive. Heavy paperwork, weak ethical guidance, or unequal access to informants could have done the opposite. Luganda classrooms therefore need fieldwork routines that are rooted in lived culture, but still careful, fair, and manageable.

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USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The author used Grammarly for language refinement, grammar checking, formatting support, and improvement of readability. No AI tool were used to generate original research data, conduct analyses, interpret results, make scientific conclusions, or replace authorial judgment. All Grammarly outputs were reviewed, verified, and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and content of the final manuscript.

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